

Let's Party Like We're Seniors by everythingsex

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Summary:

Eddie was completely fine with being a loner in high school. He had already made it to senior year, confident that he would graduate having flown completely under the radar. Until he attends a house party and from across the crowded room his eyes land on a mysterious boy with a mop of messy dark curls and an acoustic guitar.

1. Beverly Throws A Party

Author's Note:

disclaimer: this is probably trash i'm sorry

“Hey, Eddie!”

Eddie looked up from the peas he had been pushing around on his plate, lost in thought until hearing his name pulled him back into reality. The source of the voice skipped over to the table he occupied by himself, food tray in hand, her shoulder length red curls bouncing around her face until she sat down in front of Eddie.

The warmth in her smile coaxed a smile out of Eddie. “Hey Beverly.”

“Saw you sitting here all by yourself while I was waiting for Ben’s chess club to wrap up, and I thought I’d join you. As long as that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.”

“You looked pretty deep in thought before I sat down, what’s on your mind, sugar plum?”

“Oh, nothing, I was just zoning out,” Eddie lied. The truth was that he was thinking about the news story he heard on TV the night before. Some guy was thrown into the Kenduskaeg and drowned. And the police reported it as a hate crime, because it was confirmed the man was gay. It hadn’t stopped weighing on him. Neither did his mother’s comments while she chopped carrots in the kitchen. She spoke it quietly, almost to herself, but Eddie heard it clear as crystal: “One less queer in Derry.”

Beverly nodded. “That’s fair. This place is so boring. Can’t wait until we graduate.”

“Me too. Can’t wait to get out of this town.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Beverly smiled, holding up her water bottle before taking a sip. “Hey, listen, Ed,” she started as she twisted the cap back

onto the bottle. “My parents are gonna be out of town this weekend so I’m gonna throw a little party. Nothing too crazy, but I think you should come. It’s gonna be really fun.”

“I don’t know, Bev, I’m not really the partying type.”

“It’s gonna be super chill, I think it may be good for you to come out and have some fun, meet some new people, get a little drunk if you want to. It’s our senior year.” She shrugged. “We gotta make it worthwhile, right?”

“I guess...” Eddie trailed off, unconvinced. He hadn’t ever been to a real high school party before, but sometimes he was curious what they were like.

“Hey guys!” Ben sat down next to Beverly with his own lunch tray.

“Hey babe. I’m just in the middle of trying to convince Eddie to come out to my party on the weekend.”

“Oh you should absolutely come by, Eddie. It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

Eddie considered it. Maybe he could just make a small appearance and then come up with some lie as to why he needs to leave early. At least then he could check “go to a party” off of his high school bucket list.

Eddie nodded. “Maybe I’ll try to make an appearance.” The inclusion of ‘maybe’ gave him a little bit of comfort in case he changed his mind.

A grin spread across Beverly’s face and she made quick small claps in rapid succession. “I can’t wait.”

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Eddie heard the music from down the street, before Bev’s house was even in his sight. He wondered about the neighbours, and if they would possibly call and complain. It was only 9pm but he assumed the party would go on much later. It looked as though a lot of the houses on her block had retired for the night, the curtains drawn and the lights extinguished. Bev’s, on the other hand, looked

characteristically lively, every light on, the music thumping.

He ascended the porch steps and knocked three times on the door. He waited patiently, hoping to see a familiar face greet him, and was delighted when Bev's face appeared behind the screen door.

"Eddie!" She pushed the screen door open and ushered Eddie inside, pulling him into a hug. "I'm so glad you made it."

He wondered how much she had already had to drink, but she quickly interrupted his thoughts. "Come sit!" She took his hand and led him over to the living room, and reclaimed her spot on the couch next to Ben, making sure to make room for Eddie.

"Everyone, this is my friend Eddie," she gestured to him. "Eddie, this is everyone, we have Stacy," she gestured to the girl on the other side of Eddie and she smiled and gave a small wave. "Amanda," gesturing to the next girl. "Michael," was the boy sitting next to Amanda. "Josh, Leah, and Brittany." Eddie nodded looking around at all of the new faces. It almost overwhelmed him, but they immediately continued talking about whatever they had been talking about before Eddie arrived. He looked around the room. There were others having their own conversations that Bev didn't bother introducing Eddie to. There was definitely more people than Eddie had expected.

Three girls stood in the corner chatting and laughing, holding red cups. In fact, everyone was either holding a red cup, or had one placed next to them on the nearest flat surface. He wondered how people knew which one was theirs, and the thought of drinking out of a strangers cup made Eddie's stomach turn.

Eddie's eyes wandered to the other corner of the room, where a guy sitting in the reclining chair holding a guitar caught his eye. He had long dark curly hair, a sculpted jawline and cheekbones, a long tall frame, and big thick rimmed glasses, through which he gazed at a blonde girl sitting on an ottoman across from him. Eddie could only see the back of her head. He was strumming lazily on the guitar, and looking at her with something akin to desire, and Eddie wondered what the front of her looked like.

The boy with the guitar blinked calmly, and as though he had felt

someone's eyes on him, he slowly turned his head and made eye contact with Eddie, and Eddie panicked and looked away, pretending he hadn't been staring. His curiosity got the better of him after a couple moments because he stole another glance in the boy's direction and he was still looking right at him, but this time he was looking Eddie up and down and smirking. Eddie felt his cheeks burn. The boy shot Eddie a wink and brought his eyes back to the blonde.

"Eddie?"

"What?"

"Do you want something to drink?" Beverly had reached out and was touching the top of his hands.

He realized his mouth had gone completely dry. "Uh, sure."

"Come on, let me show you where everything is." She stood up and took Eddie's hand again, leading him to the kitchen.

"So this big fuckin' bowl is fruit punch and vodka, and some of the guys got a keg of beer so that's what this thing is," she gestured to a big silver tank. "And the cups are here. Not many options, Ed, but the fruit punch concoction is pretty good." She took the ladle from the punch bowl and refilled her cup. Eddie reached out and took a red cup from the stack and looked over at Bev.

"You wouldn't happen to have a marker, would you?"

Bev thought for a moment and pulled out one of the drawers behind her, taking a black permanent marker out and holding it up for Eddie.

"Thanks," he said warmly as he drew an E on the side of the cup. He glanced up as he heard the front door open and a small group of boys come in.

One of the boys Eddie recognized as Henry Bower's cousin.

From Eddie's experience, his cousin didn't have the same mean streak that Henry inherited, and Beverly didn't seem bothered by their presence.

Eddie gave her back the marker and she returned it to its drawer and found her way back to the couch.

Eddie took the ladle from the punch bowl and lifted it, while he watched... Eddie couldn't remember the boy's name... Justin? John? Something with a J. He watched as he made eye contact with the guitar boy, and Eddie wondered if they were friends.

He poured punch into his cup, and looked around the room. The kitchen was definitely a better vantage point, he could almost see the entire main floor from where he stood, including the dining room and down the hallway to where Eddie knew Bev's room was. He'd been to her house a couple times and had a decent memory of the layout.

He noticed a group of three boys sitting at Bev's dining room table. He recognized one of the boys, because he was known around the school for his particularly bad stutter.

Eddie looked back over to see Henry's cousin leaning against the wall talking with one of the guys he came in with, and he noticed Guitar Boy stand up. He placed his guitar behind the chair against the wall and fished in his pocket and retrieved a carton of cigarettes. He walked over and leaned in close to Beverly, whispering something to her. She said something back to him, but Eddie couldn't tell what. She walked towards the kitchen, towards Eddie, and Guitar Boy followed her.

Eddie realized his heart had started to beat faster and he wasn't sure why, but Beverly made her way around the island to where Eddie stood and Guitar Boy leaned against the other side of the island, facing him, with the punch bowl between them.

"Eddie, have you met Richie yet?" Beverly asked, digging through one of the kitchen drawers.

"I don't think I've had the pleasure," Richie said with a cheeky smile, holding out his hand for a hand shake.

Eddie reached forward and took it, and hoped Richie didn't pick up on how inexplicably nervous he was. Richie shook his hand firmly.

Eddie noticed that Richie had nice hands. They were like a continuation of his tall slender frame, and soft, but his fingertips were calloused.

“I’m Eddie,” he squeaked.

“Richie.” He replied simply. “Eddie, huh? Eddie Spaghetti.”

“Just Eddie.”

“Okay, Just Eddie.”

Beverly turned and handed a barbecue lighter to Richie, and he laughed. “Seems a bit like overkill, Bev.”

Bev laughed. “I’m not giving you my Zippo cause I’ll never see it again. Beggars can’t be choosers, Trashmouth.”

“Fine, thank you, Bev. Nice meeting you, Spaghetti Man.” Eddie felt himself flush. The words “don’t call me that,” queued up in his brain, but Richie had already turned around and was walking away. Eddie watched him open the front door, stepping out into the chilled autumn night.

Eddie took a sip of his punch and his face twisted in disgust. “Ugh, Beverly, this is terrible.”

“It’s a little strong. Sorry, Ed,” she chuckled.

He took another sip and grimaced as he swallowed the burning taste. It tasted how rubbing alcohol smells. He felt as though he was drinking antiseptic and the thought made him feel queasy.

Beverly returned to the conversation on the couch and Eddie watched Henry’s cousin cross the room and step outside. Curious. They hadn’t greeted each other, nor spoken a word to each other thus far as far as Eddie had seen, but he seemed to follow Richie outside. And Eddie was sure that he saw them make direct eye contact when the other boy arrived.

“Hey!” Eddie looked around for the source of the voice. He looked over and saw the stuttering boy was facing him. “D-D-Do you wuh-

wanna sit with us?”

“You’ve been standing there for a while.” One of the other boys said matter-of-factly.

“Sure,” Eddie said softly, walking over to the table and taking a seat.

“My name’s Buh-Buh-Bill.” Stuttering Bill. Eddie remembered kids talking about him. Bill stood tall with broad shoulders and kind eyes. Eyes that almost seemed to hold sadness deep inside, locked far away. He was handsome, and Eddie thought that if the poor guy didn’t have a stutter he would probably be one of the popular kids.

“I’m Stanley, Stan for short.” Eddie had a hard time reading Stan. He seemed sort of indifferent, almost cold. He sat with good posture in a neatly tucked in button up shirt, dirty blonde hair in clean defined curls.

“I’m Mike. Uh..Michael for... long? I guess?”

Stan cracked up, and the crisp delighted laughter and joyful expression seemed so unexpected from him, it actually caught Eddie off guard.

Eddie was fairly certain he hadn’t ever seen Mike at school before. He was one of the only African American kids Eddie had met in Derry. He supposed that Mike must be homeschooled, and he wondered how they knew each other.

Eddie noticed the front door open and Richie appear, entering the house and making a b-line towards the hallway. Eddie assumed he might be in a rush to use the washroom, but he walked right past the open bathroom door.

“So how do you know Beverly?” Mike asked.

Eddie was distracted, but he didn’t his best to not seem so. “We had a couple classes together last year and sat next to each other in Mr. Phillips assigned seating.”

Bill nodded. “Muh-Mr. Phillips is such an asshole.”

“Yeah, he is,” Eddie agreed. “He would freak out if he heard so much

as a whisper between me and Bev during class.”

“I was in his Buh-Buh-Bio class last year with Ruh-Richie, and if you know Ruh-Richie at all you can imagine how well that wuh-went.”

“Oh you guys know Richie?” Eddie tried not to sound overly interested, even though his interest had been thoroughly piqued.

“Unfortunately,” Stan answered.

“He’s a fucking idiot,” Bill added. “Buh-but he’s one of our buh-best friends.”

“I only just met him, why was having a class with him bad?”

“He just really embraces the class clown thing and it really got on Muh-Muh-Mr. Phillips’ last nerve. Especially when we got to human reproductive systems.”

“I can only imagine.” Stan noted.

“He’s a good guy though,” Bill added. “Duh-duh-deep down.”

“Really deep down.” Stan added.

Eddie watched as the front door opened once again and Henry’s cousin stepped into the house, walking the same direction that Richie went, down the hallway and past the bathroom. Eddie looked around the room to see if maybe he missed Richie return to the party, but he wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

He looked around the room to try and relocate the blonde girl that Richie was talking to before and he saw her talking to another group of girls. Maybe Richie wasn’t that interested in her after all.

As Eddie tipped the last of his drink into his mouth, he realized the fullness of his bladder. He stood up, letting the other boys where he was going, and started towards the bathroom. Upon standing up and walking, he realized that he was already a little bit tipsy.

He used the washroom, washed his hands twice, and splashed some water on his face, and decided that he could probably use a little bit

of fresh air. The party was getting kind of warm with so many people. He remembered Bev's back porch and quietly slipped out into the cool night.

It was quiet and peaceful outside, a nice change from the bumping music and chatter of people. Eddie did notice, however, that it smelled a little weird. Like a skunk, Eddie realized. He wondered if one was lurking around the outside of the house, he would be disgusted and mortified if he were to get sprayed. Coupled with the idea of his mother forcing him to take tomato juice baths made him shudder. He scanned the backyard and couldn't see anything, the backyard dimly illuminated by the light from inside the house.

He leaned over the railing on the side of the porch and peered along the side of the house. His eyes adjusted and he narrowed them, trying to get a better look.

There, he quickly realized, was Richie and Henry's cousin. Kissing. Eddie pressed his hand tight over his mouth and held his breath, careful to not make any noise. They were kissing intensely. Making out. Their hips were pressed together, their legs staggered, they were as close to each other as they could possibly be. Richie's hand was holding the other boy's jaw, while the other boy had his hand behind Richie's head tangled in his unruly dark curls.

Eddie stepped backwards silently and slipped back inside the safety of the house. He leaned against the wall and pressed his eyes shut, the image still in his head. An image he wasn't supposed to see. He wanted to keep looking. He wanted to stare at them doing that forever. He shook his head, trying to shake the feelings away. It was wrong. What they were doing was wrong. Eddie had always been told it was wrong. But his heart thudding in his chest and the warmth in his stomach told him otherwise.

Back inside the house, he stood against the wall in the hallway for a while, and tried to collect his thoughts. Questions swarmed around his head. Was Richie gay? Did people know? Eddie wondered if he should try and keep his distance from Richie.

All of a sudden the back door swung open. "Spaghetti man!" As Richie leaned against the wall next to Eddie, he realized that the

smell lingered on Richie. Eddie wondered if there was a tactful way to ask if Richie had been sprayed by a skunk.

“Hey, Richie.”

“What are you doing here by yourself?”

“Just uh... wanted to have some alone time.”

Richie nodded. “Yeah, me too, Eds.” Alone time. Yeah.

Eddie looked up at Richie, and he took a moment to really look, his nose and cheeks dusted with freckles that his glasses only magnified from this close. His lips were pink and swollen and the image of Richie and the other boy flashed through his head, seemingly burned into his memory.

Eds, Richie had called him. His name was Eddie. He wished that Richie giving him a nickname didn’t cause butterflies in his stomach.

“My name is Eddie.”

“So it is.” Richie gazed down at Eddie with the same half lidded eyes that he remembered him giving to the blonde girl. Maybe that’s just how he looks at people, Eddie considered. Hoped, even. Still, the way he was looking at him made Eddie’s heart pound. Eddie met Richie’s eyes and he noticed how bloodshot they were.

“Richie can I ask you something? I don’t want you to take it the wrong way.”

Richie’s brows furrowed, but then softened. “Uh, sure.”

“Have you had any recent altercations with a skunk?”

Richie bursted into laughter.

“What?” Eddie exclaimed.

Richie couldn’t contain his laughter.

Eddie gave him a shove. “Tell me what’s funny, asshole.”

Richie started to calm down, still giggling, wiping under his eyes where tears had accumulated. He took a little plastic bag out of the pocket of his worn leather jacket and held it up for Eddie to see.

“I don’t get it.” Eddie said, still confused.

Richie opened the bag. “Smell it.”

Eddie leaned in and took a whiff of the contents of the bag. “Whoa.”

“It’s weed, Eddie.”

Eddie didn’t respond.

“You know, Marijuana. Mary-Jane. Cannabis. Wacky tobacky. Schticky-icky—”

“Okay, I get it, Richie.”

“Are you sure? I could go on.”

“I have no doubt.”

“So you aren’t very experienced in the art of the ganj, huh, Eds?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Listen, I’m not one to peer pressure, but if you ever want to experiment with the Devil’s lettuce, I’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

Eddie felt his heart thudding in his chest, and he wished it would stop beating so damn fast. Did he really mean that? He couldn’t picture himself, Eddie, the asthmatic, germaphobic, hypochondriac Eddie hanging out and smoking weed with Richie, cool, laid back, guitar playing, weed smoking Richie.

The back door opened, interrupting their conversation, briefly stealing Richie’s attention, but after a few moments he ignored it. As Henry’s cousin stepped inside and walked down the hallway passed them, they didn’t even acknowledge each other. In fact, Richie didn’t look away from Eddie. He purposefully didn’t look away from Eddie.

It's a secret, Eddie realized. No one knows about them. No one except Eddie.

When Eddie looked up to meet Richie's eyes, he was looking down at Eddie's body. The room suddenly felt ten degrees warmer. Richie trailed his eyes back up to meet Eddie's, seemingly making no effort to try and hide his gazes. Eddie felt like all the air had been sucked out from his lungs.

"Hey," Richie reached out patted Eddie's shoulder. "It was nice talking to ya, Eds, but I'm gonna go see if Jess is still here."

"Oh-Ok."

Richie walked away, but the warmth from his touch on Eddie's shoulder lingered on his body, and Eddie relished it, but felt inexplicably guilty for doing so.

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The idea of having more to drink wasn't exactly alluring to Eddie, so he rinsed out his red cup and filled it with cold water. He turned back to the living room, where the party raged on. Bev was half sitting on Ben's lap, laughing.

Richie did end up reuniting with the blonde girl, whom Eddie now knew was named Jess. He still wasn't able to see her face from where they stood.

Eddie did prefer this viewpoint of the party, so he crossed around to the other side of the island and sat down on one of the stools.

One of the girls sitting on the couch spoke, Eddie couldn't remember her name. Amanda? Or was she Brittany? "Hey, I know what we should do." Everyone turned to look at her expectantly. "We should play spin the bottle."

"Yes." Bev pointed at her with a smile.

"But we don't have any bottles, just these cups," another person on the couch noted.

“Hang on,” Bev said, standing up. She walked over towards the kitchen. “Eddie! I was wondering where you went. Are you having fun?”

Eddie knew the answer Bev wanted to hear, so he indulged her. “Yeah, I am.” ‘Fun’ wasn’t really the first word he would have gone for. ‘Interesting’ would have been more accurate.

“Hey, a bunch of us are gonna play spin the bottle, you wanna come join?” She asked as she opened the cupboard under the sink.

“I’m good, thanks though, Bev.”

“Aha!” she exclaimed as she pulled out the empty bottle of vodka that had presumably gone into the punch bowl. She bounced back into the living room and placed the bottle in the middle of the coffee table, taking a seat back on Ben’s lap. She whispered something in his ear and they nodded to each other.

Everyone had formed a neat circle around the coffee table, some on the couch, some sitting on the floor. Richie and Jess were among them. Wow, Eddie thought to himself. She was really beautiful. Both of them now faced Eddie, and he could now see her soft features and tanned complexion, her arched brows and rosy cheeks, and her breasts pushed up to form a line of cleavage where her low cut shirt scooped down.

“Anyone wanna do the honours?”

“How about Amanda since it was her idea,” one of the guys interjected.

“Sure,” Amanda shrugged. She leaned toward and spun the bottle with a flick of her wrist. It landed on one of the guys from the High School football team. Amanda stood up. “Alright Bryce. Standard kiss?” she asked the group. “Or en francais?” She smiled.

“We aren’t in middle school, Amanda. Give the people something to write home about.” Bryce laughed.

Amanda did exactly that. She sat on Bryce’s lap and kissed him deeply. His hands landed on her hips, prompting Bev to speak up.

“Alright you two, get a fucking room. Preferably not mine.”

Amanda stood up, smiling, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. Then she took her seat. Eddie was thanking his lucky stars that he declined the offer to join the game.

Now it was Bryce's turn to spin, and he did so, and the bottle slowed to a stop on Richie. Eddie noticed Richie's face begin to flush as he looked at Bryce. “Not a chance,” he laughed.

“Don't kid yourself, Tozier. I know you'd love a chance to kiss these lips, you fucking faggot.”

“That's enough, Bryce,” Bev interrupted.

“Hey, fuck you, Bryce. Tell your mom to call me back, I had such a good time with her last night.”

“Fuck you Richie, everyone knows you're a fucking fag,” Bryce continued. Eddie watched Henry's cousin shift in his seat.

“Bryce, your turn is over. In fact you can get the fuck out of my house, unless you wanna cool your jets.”

“Fine.” Bryce leaned back into the couch.

“Opposite sex kissing only, for obvious reasons,” Bev established. “Maybe I should have said that from the beginning, but I assumed it was implied,” she looked at Bryce as she said it. “Go ahead Richie.”

Richie actually didn't seem bothered by Bryce's comments, and leaned forward to spin the bottle. It landed on the girl sitting next to Bryce. Richie bursted out in a fit of laughter. “Oh, that's fucking good, isn't that some instant karma. First your mom and then your girlfriend.”

“Bryce, we don't have to—” the girl started.

Bryce looked at her and looked at Richie.

“What's the matter Bryce? Scared of losing your girlfriend to a fucking faggot? You said it yourself, right? Are you that fucking pathetic in the sack, or what?”

“Richie, that’s enough,” Bev interrupted.

“Alright, we’re out of here,” Bryce stood up and his girlfriend followed his lead.

“Come on, Bryce, you’re not even gonna let me fuck your girlfriend?”

Bryce raised his middle finger to Richie as he opened the front door.

“I’ll even let you watch!” Richie called as Bryce slammed the door behind them. “Good fucking riddance,” he said quietly, almost to himself.

“Come on, Rich, you didn’t have to take it that far.”

“Oh what, I’m not allowed to defend myself? You know what, I’m fucking out of here, too.”

Richie stood and collected his guitar and secured it in its case.

“Richie, come on, you know that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean, Beverly? You heard what he said. I’m just supposed to sit there and take that shit? No way in hell.” Richie pushed past Beverly with his guitar on his back. Eddie looked over as the other three boys were standing up, ready, and as Richie stormed out of the house, they followed suit. Eddie wanted to run after them. He wanted to see if Richie was okay. He supposed that Richie did have three friends there to console him. He wondered if they knew the truth.

He looked around at the tense atmosphere after Richie stormed out. It wasn’t comfortable, and Eddie also had an increasing desire to leave the party, when Beverly answered his prayers.

“You know what,” Bev started. “Party’s fucking over, everyone can leave now.” Everyone sat in awe, not moving. “Did I not make myself clear? Get the fuck out!”

The partygoers snapped back into reality and began to clear out, taking their belongings and leaving behind a sea of red cups.

People filed out of the house, as Eddie and Ben lingered behind. Beverly made sure everyone was gone and locked the front door.

She turned around and dropped herself against the door. "Fucking Bryce. Fucking asshole ruining the entire party." She covered her face with her hands. "Fucking fuck!" she screamed into them.

Eddie's wide eyes made contact with Ben's. Ben stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. "It's ok, babe. There's nothing more you could have done, that guy's just an asshole."

"What about validating Richie? He called him a faggot, Ben. And I just sat there and let it happen."

"You tried to de-escalate it, Bev, I heard you. You did what you could."

Beverly dropped her face into the crook of Ben's neck, and Ben held her. "Hey, maybe we should start cleaning up," Ben offered. "You don't have to stay, Eddie."

Bev's head shot up. "Oh my god, Eddie, you're still here."

"Yeah," Eddie said, touching the back of his neck. "Sorry I was kind of quiet. Didn't mean to surprise you."

"No you didn't, I just didn't realize. But Ben's right, you don't have to stay."

"Do you guys need help cleaning up?"

"We'll be okay, thanks though, Eddie," Ben said warmly.

Eddie walked over and Bev pulled him into a tight hug. "Thank you for coming, Eddie. I know you didn't really want to. And I'm sorry it ended like that."

"It's okay, Bev. Ben's right, you did what you could."

Beverly looked over at him and smiled. "He's right about most things." She turned and walked Eddie to the door. "Get home safe, okay? Call me when you get home."

Eddie nodded. And he did call.

“Hi Beverly. I just got home,” he whispered into the receiver.

“Thanks for calling, Ed. And thanks again for showing up. Sweet dreams, sugar plum.”

“You too, Bev.” He hung up the phone and tiptoed upstairs to his bedroom, in an effort to avoid waking his mother.

2. Eddie Becomes a Loser

The next few weeks at school, Eddie started seeing Richie a lot more. Richie insisted that Eddie ate lunch with him and the other “Losers” as Richie so lovingly called them. He explained to Eddie that they were “taking back the word” and “sticking it to the man.” Eddie felt like he would fit right in.

Richie didn’t seem like he was affected at all by Bryce’s comments at Beverly’s party and Eddie almost admired him for it. He wondered if it had gotten to him and maybe he just had a good way of hiding it.

One Wednesday during lunch, the Losers invited Eddie to come with them to “the Barrens.” When Eddie asked what the Barrens were, Bill told him that it was a wide bank along the river where they used to play as kids. It was somewhat secluded from the rest of Derry, Beverly had added.

After last period, the gang met in the school’s parking lot. Richie and Mike were the only two Losers with both a full license and their own vehicles, and since Mike was homeschooled and lived on a farm, and needed to finish his chores before he was able to meet the group in the Barrens. Which left the rest of them to pile into Richie’s little red Volkswagen Golf.

The car seated five, but due to Richie’s giraffe-like proportions, he had to have the driver’s seat pushed virtually all the way back, making one of the backseats nearly impossible to sit in. He refused to move it forward, claiming it was too uncomfortable and made it too hard to drive.

They spent far too long trying to work out the seating arrangement.

“Bill should take shotgun, cause he’s around the same height as Richie,” Bev established. “And Ben and I can sit in the back, I can sit on his lap.”

“Eddie should puh-puh-probably sit on someone’s lap, too. Eddie and Buh-Bev are the smallest,” Bill added.

“Sure,” Eddie agreed. He really didn’t mind sitting on someone’s lap. In the short time he had known the Losers, they had become quite good friends.

“Eddie can sit on my lap, but I’m also pretty tall.” Stan would be taking the middle of the backseat, and he had a point.

“There’s muh-much muh-more room in the front seat. Eddie can sit on muh-my lap.”

“Hang on,” Richie said, getting into the driver’s seat.

“What are you doing?” Bev asked.

“Moving the seat up.”

Eddie saw Bev and Stan share a humoured look, before they all got into the car.

“Couldn’t bear the thought of Eddie sitting on Bill’s lap, huh, Rich?” Stan quipped, patting Richie’s shoulder from the backseat.

Eddie felt the blood rush to his face. Would Richie really have been jealous?

“Just had a change of heart, Stanley, that’s all. I realized I was being an asshole.”

“Holy shit,” Stan said. “That’s one for the history books. Oct. 7th, 1992. The day Richie Tozier admits that he’s an asshole.”

“Oct. 8th, 1992,” Richie replied, turning the ignition. “The day Richie Tozier steals all of Stanley Uris’s left shoes.”

Bill and Ben laughed.

“You really crossed a line, Richie,” Stan said, but Eddie could see he was smiling.

As they exited the school parking lot, Bill sorted through Richie’s glove compartment, looking at his cassette tapes. He settled on one and ejected the current tape, briefly ceasing the music before he

popped in the new one.

Eddie didn't recognize the song or the artist, but Richie seemed to know it from the first note. "Nice choice, Big Bill!" Richie said as he turned up the volume.

Richie sang along to the music, loudly and badly, with no apprehension. Bill and Beverly joined in with Richie scream-singing the words. Eddie noticed that Bill didn't stutter when he was singing.

It was a pretty short drive to the Barrens. It was at the outskirts of town, and Eddie could see what Bev meant when she said it was secluded. Richie parked on a particularly wide stretch of the gravel shoulder, leaving room for Mike to park later.

The "Barrens" were really not overly barren at all. It was a densely packed forest area split by a shallow creek running through the center, the wide bank composed of sand and rocks. As they walked along the bank, they passed multiple big concrete sewer drains, all with metal grates blocking the six or seven foot tall entrance. Exit, more like, Eddie corrected himself, realizing that no one in their right mind would try to enter those things.

Mike arrived shortly after they did, and the group now sat in what Eddie was told was their usual spot, with pseudo benches made of logs and an unlit fire pit in the middle, passing around a joint. Eddie was nervous about the joint going around the circle, nervous about having to say no. He wanted Richie to think he was cool, desperately so, even though Eddie would be hard pressed to admit it, but he didn't think he was ready to try weed.

After Richie lit the joint and started it off, he passed it to Ben. Eddie would have expected Ben to pass, but he didn't. He took a long drag from the marijuana cigarette and then held it up to Bev's lips where she was laying with her head in his lap, and with closed eyes, she breathed in the smoke.

Eddie could feel his palms getting sweaty as he tried to think of what to say when it came to his turn. Ben passed the joint to Bill, who also

took a drag from it. Bill and Mike were sitting across from each other on the ground playing double solitaire. Bill offered the joint to Mike, and as if Eddie's prayers had been answered, Mike took it but instead of holding it to his lips, he passed it along to Stan. Eddie waited for Mike to be questioned, but no one said anything. No one even noticed. Eddie breathed a sigh of relief.

It also came as a surprise to Eddie that Stan took the joint and inhaled from it. He didn't have Stan pegged as the type to indulge in marijuana. Stan handed the joint to Eddie as he exhaled the smoke.

Eddie looked down at the joint between his fingers. It was still lit on the inside, but it seemed as though it was threatening to go out the longer Eddie held onto it. He did consider lifting it to his lips and attempting to smoke it, but he thought about how it had already touched the lips of six other people, and he shuddered. He also didn't want the thing to trigger an asthma attack.

He looked over at Richie, and noticed that Richie was already watching him. Eddie glanced around to see if anyone else was watching, and everyone was going about their own business. Ben stared lovingly down at Bev, playing with her auburn curls, Mike and Bill continued their card game, Stan was buried in a book.

Eddie locked eyes with Richie again.

"You don't have to," Richie said, so quietly Eddie wondered if he actually made any noise at all or if he had just read Richie's lips.

Eddie nodded and passed it back to Richie. "It's just... asthma... and the germs."

Richie took the joint from Eddie and lifted it to his lips, and inhaled. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Eds." He exhaled the smoke.

"Thanks, Richie."

Richie looked over at Ben and extended his arm to pass over the joint. Ben didn't notice. "Haystack," Richie said, and Ben looked up. "Here." Ben reached up and took it.

Richie looked back over to Eddie. "Did you say the germs bother you?" he asked.

Eddie nodded. "Yeah. I'm germaphobic."

"And asthmatic?"

"Yup. And that's only the tip of the iceberg."

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The joint went around a couple more times. Richie picked at the strings of his guitar, a soft melody and the smell of marijuana floating around the air.

Eddie was sitting on one of the logs with his back against Richie's. Richie convinced Eddie that he needed the back support to play better. Eddie was hesitant at first, but it was comfortable, leaning against Richie, listening to the strums of his guitar.

"That sounds really nice, Rich. What is it?"

"The Sounds of Silence," Richie replied. "Simon and Garfunkel." Richie continued to play the song for a while, until he stopped strumming. He dropped his head back onto Eddie's shoulder. "Would you be the Garfunkel to my Simon, Eds?"

"Not a chance," Eddie retorted.

"Come on Richie, that's absurd," Stan said, drawing his attention away from the book he was reading.

"Thank you, Stan," Eddie replied.

"We all know Eddie would be Simon in that scenario."

"Hey!" Eddie said. "Don't encourage him."

"It's true, you'd be Simon for sure," Ben added.

Richie was strumming again now, aimlessly. "No one ever wants to be Garfunkel, but I'd take that bullet if it meant you'd be my Simon."

“Would you play the song again, Richie?”

“Of course, Eds.”

“I hate it when you call me that.”

“I know,” Richie said, and Eddie couldn’t see Richie’s face but he could hear the smile in his voice.

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After the last period of the day on Friday, Richie caught Eddie at his locker. “Hey Eduardo.”

“Hey Richie.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

Eddie hesitated. “Probably gonna do some homework, why?”

“Bill’s hosting a movie night, you in?”

“Uhh...” Eddie considered the amount of homework he had, but as he looked up at Richie, he couldn’t think of a way to say no. “Okay.”

“Awesome! I’ll pick you up at 7. Oh wait, where do you live?”

Eddie ripped a page from his notebook and wrote his address and phone number on the paper. “Just in case,” Eddie said as he handed the paper to Richie.

“You have nice handwriting, Eds. Also, thanks for sparing me the awkwardness of asking for your number.” Richie winked.

Eddie felt himself blush, and Richie grinned. Eddie closed his locker. “I’ll see you at 7,” he said, turning and walking away.

“See you soon, Spaghetti man!” Richie called.

“That’s not my name!” Eddie called back without turning around.

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The movie was admittedly beginning to bore Eddie. He wondered who picked it out, but he wouldn't dare ask. He felt Richie stir next to him and then before Eddie knew what was happening, Richie twisted his body and dropped his head into Eddie's lap. His long legs extended over the opposite side of the love seat, draping over the armrest.

Eddie looked down at Richie, and his eyes were closed, and Eddie was thankful because he could feel the warmth sizzling on his cheeks. He glanced around at the others, and their eyes were all glued to the television set. He wondered how they remained so focused on such a boring film.

Eddie looked back down at Richie, and Richie's eyes remained closed. His eyes lingered, carefully, ready to dart away in the event that Richie's eyes might snap open. But they didn't. And Eddie couldn't pull his eyes away.

Before he had a chance to overthink it, he slowly reached out and removed Richie's glasses from his face, folding them and placing them on the table beside him. Even then, Richie's eyes remained closed, and Eddie concluded that he wasn't sleeping. He couldn't have fallen asleep that quickly, and removing his glasses surely would have woken him up. He had to be keeping his eyes closed purposefully.

Eddie watched Richie laying there peacefully. His soft breathing. The curve of his lips. The freckles on his nose. His thick dark lashes. His unruly curls. Acting on a deep compulsion that Eddie didn't think he'd be able to ignore even if he wanted to, he lifted his hand and took a strand of Richie's hair, aimlessly playing with it, gently curling it around his finger. Eddie watched a smile tug at the corner of Richie's lips.

Eddie looked up again to make sure no one was watching him. Everyone else was still focused on the movie. He looked back down at Richie, and as gently and tenderly as he could manage, he touched his index finger to the middle of Richie's forehead, and then slowly traced his finger slowly down the forms of Richie's profile. Between his brows, along the bridge of his nose, down the scoop of his septum, over the ridge of his cupid's bow, impossibly slow over his

lips, following the curve of his chin. He dragged his finger to the side and traced it along Richie's jawline and up to his ear.

Upon Eddie dropping his hand away from Richie's skin, Richie's eyes slowly flickered open and locked with Eddie's. Eddie blinked slowly. He couldn't even rationalize to himself what compelled him to do that, let alone try to explain it to Richie. It didn't seem to confuse Richie, though. His eyes brimmed with warmth and affection.

The movie blared on, and none of the other Losers noticed anything. Eddie tried to ignore what just happened and refocus on the movie, repressing all of the thoughts bubbling to the surface. He mentally decided on behalf of them both that they didn't have to acknowledge it. So they didn't. The movie finished. Richie sat up, rubbing his eyes. Eddie had decided to walk home but Richie insisted on driving him, even with Eddie's protests.

They said their goodbyes to the Losers and got into Richie's car.

Now they were alone, and Eddie expected questioning.

"What the fuck just happened in there? What was that, Eddie? Explain yourself," Eddie expected to hear. But Richie didn't say anything. He turned on the ignition. A cold sweat fell over Eddie as he realized that this could be a completely silent car ride, and he realized that he would rather have Richie yell at him for the entire ride than silence.

Then Richie spoke. "Eds, I have an idea. There's something I want to show you." He met Eddie's concerned gaze. "Just trust me, okay?"

They drove for a while. Eddie asked where they were going. Richie wouldn't tell him. They drove up a couple hills and then Richie turned off of the road, and slowed to a stop.

Richie put the car in park and unbuckled his seat belt, and popped the trunk. "Come on," he said, getting out of the car. Eddie followed his lead, and while Richie dug around through his trunk, Eddie walked forward, too distracted to join Richie at the trunk of the car.

"Wow," he said aloud. He could see all of Derry from where he stood,

the lights pin pricked around winding city streets, giving the city a warm golden glow in the night sky.

“Isn’t it breathtaking?” Richie walked up behind him holding two blankets. He unfolded one over the grass. “This one’s thicker but the other one’s bigger and warmer, so this one is good for sitting on.”

Eddie initially supposed that with two blankets each of them would get one, but a big part of him did prefer the idea of sitting on a blanket rather than on the ground. And a smaller part of him, one that he didn’t much prefer to listen to, liked the idea of sharing a blanket.

As Richie unfolded the other blanket, Eddie sat down, tucking his knees in close to his body. The nights were starting to get cold as summer faded into fall. Then in that same moment Richie was around him with a big fluffy warm blanket. Despite everything inside his head telling him not to, he snuggled closer to Richie, telling himself that it was only because Richie was so warm and he was starting to get cold. In that moment he realized Richie’s arm was around him, holding the blanket around them both. Eddie felt his heartbeat kicking in his chest, and he wondered if Richie could feel it, too.

“Hey Richie?”

“Yeah, Eds?”

“Do you have any weed with you?”

“You wanna try weed?”

“I think so.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Eds, you’re asthmatic. You have your inhaler, right?”

“I always do.”

“Ok. If you’re sure.”

Richie fished through one of the pockets on the inside of his leather jacket, producing a clear zippered bag and a lighter. The bag contained some loose weed and two fresh rolled joints.

“You’re 100% sure, right, Eds? I don’t want to pressure you into anything.”

“I’m sure.”

“Ok.” Richie nodded and removed one of the joints from the bag, and he stashed the bag back inside his jacket. “Here’s what you wanna do. You’re gonna wanna light it, suck some of the smoke with your mouth, take the joint away from your lips but keep inhaling a little bit, hold it, and then exhale. It sounds complicated, but just watch.” Richie placed the joint between his lips, and raised the lighter, flicking it and igniting it. He brought the flame to the tip of the joint, and it began to burn. He breathed in, inhaling the smoke, and as he removed the joint from his lips, he held it. Eddie watched in awe as Richie exhaled a cloud of smoke.

“Here,” Richie gave Eddie the joint. “You don’t have to breathe in as much as I did, I took more in cause I’m used to it, but you can just take a little bit.”

Eddie nodded as he lifted it to his lips.

“Okay, just breathe in through your mouth, nice and slow,” Richie directed. Eddie did so, and furrowed his brows as he felt the burning sensation in his throat, completely different than the burning of alcohol. A hot, painful burn. He resisted the urge to cough. “Okay, now you can take away the joint and breathe in a little clean air, it will help. It burns a little the first time.” Eddie nodded, following Richie’s instructions. “Now hold it, and exhale whenever you’d like.” Eddie exhaled, seeing the smoke in front of his vision like warm breath on a winter day. He coughed a little bit through the exhale, and Richie patted his back.

“I coughed way more than that my first time. You’re a tough cookie, Eduardo.”

Eddie felt his face get hot. “Don’t call me that,” he said softly.

Richie took the joint and took another drag from it. "You'll probably feel it come over you slowly," he said as he held the smoke, and exhaled after he finished speaking.

And he did. He felt good. Giggly. His body felt like it was melting and moving in ways he hadn't felt before. He watched lazily as Richie took another hit. It almost felt like slow motion. He allowed himself to take the time to focus on the curve of Richie's lips around the paper, the edges of his jaw, the flutter of his lashes behind his magnifying eyeglasses.

Richie exhaled the smoke and looked down at Eddie. "What?" he smiled.

"Nothing," Eddie said, a smile forming on his own lips.

"Are you high?" Richie laughed.

Eddie nodded slowly. "I think."

"That's good. Some people don't feel anything the first time."

"I feel something."

Richie studied Eddie's face for a moment, meeting his eyes and then glancing at his lips. "Me too," he whispered.

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Every year on Halloween, Angela Martin had a party. Apparently, it was always legendary. Eddie hadn't ever been invited, but every year he would hear everyone talking about it during the first days of November. One kid in Eddie's chemistry class freshman year bragged about losing his virginity at Angela's party. And to Becky Thompson, no less, one of the most popular girls at Derry High.

In his sophomore year, Eddie heard about a group of kids jumping from the roof of Angela's garage into the swimming pool, and one of the neighbors calling the cops.

Junior year, someone dared Carson Holwell to streak naked through the party and he was drunk enough that he actually did it.

Now, it was his senior year, and Eddie would actually be there to witness all of the craziest things people said happened at Angela's parties. Richie had been invited, and was allowed an exclusive plus one. He hadn't initially planned to go to the party, as the Loser's usually all dressed up to go trick or treating every Halloween, but everyone in the group urged Richie to take advantage of the party invite. The Losers had decided to skip trick or treating anyways and opted for a spooky movie night with Halloween candy in lieu of, on account of growing too old for going door to door for free candy.

So Richie decided to go, given that he found great difficulty in passing up the opportunity to go to a highschool party. After all, they were seniors now, so the time for high school parties was due to expire.

Eddie was surprised when Richie asked him to be his plus one. He would have assumed Richie would have asked Bill or Stan, since they've been friends for so much longer. But the others really didn't seem to mind that Richie asked Eddie. So they went to the party together.

The party was to start at 8pm, so Richie picked Eddie up from his house at 8pm.

"It's always best to arrive at a party well after it's started," Richie assured him.

Richie didn't want to drive to Angela's, as he knew that he'd be drinking and didn't want to worry about leaving his car at her house overnight. Luckily Derry was a small town and they were able to walk from Richie's house after spending an hour hanging out at Richie's playing video games and taking turns sipping from a bottle of cheap vodka Richie kept hidden in his closet, chasing it with orange juice.

They also had to decide on a last minute costume for Eddie. Richie loved Halloween, and had his costume planned for months. Jason Voorhees from Friday the 13th.

After some brainstorming, Richie had an idea. He snuck an eyeliner pencil from his mother's makeup bag and drew cat whiskers on

Eddie's face. It was definitely understated, but they decided it would suffice.

When they arrived at Angela's, Eddie was shocked at how nice her house was. It looked like a mansion.

"Her parents are loaded," Richie explained when Eddie vocalized his surprise. "They're both brain surgeons or something. It's crazy that they let her throw this huge of a party every year. I think they even buy the alcohol and everything."

"I couldn't imagine having parents like that. Must be amazing."

As they walked up the steps, Eddie noticed the tall muscular man standing at the door, dressed completely in black, holding a clipboard.

"Check out this guy, really taking his bouncer costume to the next level," Richie gestured to him. "I like your commitment to the joke, buddy."

"Name?"

Richie laughed. "That's pretty good," he said as he went to reach passed the man to open the door, and the man blocked him.

"It's not a costume, kid. They hired me. You're the fifth person to make that joke. Now, what's your name?"

"Richie," he said as he backed up a little. "Richie Tozier. And my plus one is Eddie Kaspbrak."

"I don't give a shit who your plus one is," the bouncer said as his eyes skimmed the clipboard he was holding. "Yeah, Richie Tozier, you're on the list. Go ahead." He stepped to the side and let them in.

Angela's house was just as beautiful on the inside as it was on the outside. The main foyer was large and spacious, with marble floors and a grand spiral staircase leading to the upper floor and the balcony that overlooked the foyer. An intricate crystal chandelier scattered light around the room. This was a house that Eddie would expect social elites might gather in, sipping champagne from flutes

and wearing designer suits and dresses. The crowd of teenagers with their red cups seemed so out of place.

Richie and Eddie moved further into the house towards the kitchen, walking around groups of people. The kitchen island had stacks of red cups and what must have been a dozen bottles of various alcohols and just as many bottles of soda. A piece of paper was taped to the island countertop reading: “Help Yourself” with a smiley face and a heart drawn under the words.

Richie took a cup and Eddie followed his lead, taking one and then unzipping his fanny pack to remove a black permanent marker. He wrote his full name on the side of the cup.

“What are you—” Richie started. “Oh, right. Germaphobe.”

Eddie nodded, placing the pen back into his fanny pack.

“You know, that fanny pack is really cute on you.”

Eddie furrowed his brows, feeling the familiar tingle on his cheeks. “I can’t tell if you’re making fun of me.”

Richie smiled, and turned to pour a helping of vodka into his cup. “There’s some truth to it,” he said, without turning to look at Eddie.

“What should I drink? There’s too much to choose from,” Eddie said, changing the subject.

“Well I’m partial to vodka, but it’s just what I’m used to drinking.”

“I can’t stand the taste. It’s like rubbing alcohol.”

Richie laughed. “Well, they have flavoured ones, too. This one’s vanilla.” Richie unscrewed the cap of the bottle and held it up for Eddie to smell.

“That just smells like someone mixed rubbing alcohol with vanilla perfume.”

“You could try mixing rum and coke. I know people like that.”

"I'll just stick with vodka," Eddie decided, lifting the bottle and pouring some into his cup. He filled the rest of it with Sprite, and took a sip. It wasn't terrible.

The front door opened and Eddie and Richie both looked up to see who entered.

"Fuck," Richie said, as soon as he saw Henry Bowers and his cousin enter the room.

"What?" Eddie said, trying to act as though Richie's reaction was confusing to him.

"Oh, I just... I can't stand Henry Bowers. And the feeling is mutual, believe me." Richie placed his mask over his face. "Maybe he won't be able to tell who I am."

Eddie looked at Richie and then looked over to see Henry approaching them and his cousin following behind him.

"Well, well, well," Henry said. "If it isn't Trashmouth Tozier and his little fairy boyfriend."

"Goddamnit," Richie said, pulling off the mask. "How did you manage to make the guestlist, Henry?"

"I didn't, but James did. So he brought me along."

James made eye contact with Richie. He looked scared.

Henry stepped closer, the only distance between him and Richie was the length of the island between them. "Listen Trashmouth. James told me what happened."

Richie looked at James with a surprised smile. "Did he now?"

James looked at the ground sheepishly.

"Yeah. He did. Told me all about how you came onto him at the arcade."

"What?" Richie laughed. "Listen Henry, I think there's been some sort

of mistake.”

Henry grabbed the collar of Richie’s shirt, yanking him forward, causing Richie to knock over one of the liquor bottles. As it clattered on the counter, a hush fell over the rest of the party as everyone turned to look. Eddie intercepted the bottle as it rolled towards the edge, and he set it upright.

“I think,” Henry started, “You need to stay the fuck away from my cousin.”

“Done and done,” Richie said.

“Hey!” A girl’s voice grabbed everyone’s attention. “Henry. You can leave.”

Henry released his grip from Richie’s collar. “You don’t scare me, Angela.”

“And you don’t scare me. Now get the fuck out.” Angela looked over to where her bouncer was standing, inside now, probably summoned when Angela heard the bottle fall, and tilted her head towards Henry. The bouncer took a couple steps forward, and Henry spoke up.

“Alright, alright.” He lifted his hands in surrender. “This isn’t over, Tozier,” he said as he glanced back in Richie’s direction. The bouncer escorted him out of the house. James followed them.

“James,” Angela called after him. “You don’t have to leave.”

James looked over at Henry and then back at Richie. “I know,” he said before he followed Henry outside, closing the door behind them.

“Richie, I’m so sorry,” Angela said as she turned back to them. “He should have been on the blacklist.”

“It’s not your fault, Angela,” Richie said. He looked over at Eddie, and the party resumed just as quickly as it had paused, everyone returning to their loud chatter.

“Come on, Eds,” Richie said, taking Eddie’s hand and leading him upstairs.

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Richie led Eddie into the bathroom and locked the door behind them.

“What are we doing?” Eddie asked.

“I just feel like I might cry any second, that’s all.” Richie leaned his back against the shower stall door and slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor.

Eddie sat down next to him. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I’ll be okay, Eddie, I’ll get over it. I want to tell you what’s going on I promise I do, but I just... I can’t. I hope you can understand.”

“I understand. I want you to feel better, and if talking about it would help, I want you to know I’m here for you. But if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay, too. I’ll still be here.”

Richie looked up at Eddie, his eyes welling up, and he smiled weakly. He leaned forward and pulled Eddie into a hug, holding Eddie tight and pressing his face into the crook of Eddie’s neck. He smelled good, Eddie realized.

“Nothing you could say right now would change my opinion of you,” Eddie whispered.

Richie pulled away, wiping away the tears that had since fallen. “You’re sure about that?” he said softly.

Eddie nodded.

“He’d kill me if I told anyone. I mean he’d literally kill me, or at the very least he’d have Henry do it for him. You have to promise not to tell anyone, Eddie.”

“I promise.”

“James and I were...kinda... fooling around.” Richie paused, almost waiting for a reaction from Eddie, but he didn’t react. Richie continued. “It started a couple months ago. We were both at this party and we were both completely shitfaced. I kept catching his eye

from across the room, but every time he was always already looking at me. I could just feel by the way he looked at me, like no boy had ever looked at me like that before.” Richie paused, eyeing Eddie, and Eddie nodded for him to continue. “I went upstairs. He followed me. We didn’t even say anything to each other. It was like this unspoken agreement. Purely transactional. We went into some girls room. Probably belonged to the party’s hostess, maybe her sister. I didn’t even know who the hostess was. I don’t even know if she had a sister.”

He looked at Eddie, and Eddie motioned for him to continue. He was stalling.

“Anywho, we started kissing. Like... really... kissing. We were both drunk and didn’t know what we were doing.” Richie swallowed. “James eventually stopped. He told me that people were gonna wonder where he went, so he should probably go. Then he told me to stay put for a little while. Long enough for people not to connect the dots. So I agreed. I stayed put. Probably for much longer than was really necessary but I wanted to make sure no one would notice. For his sake and mine.

“Then it became a regular occurrence. Whenever we found ourselves at the same parties. We never actually talked at the parties. He was always worried someone might catch on. He actually wouldn’t be caught dead talking to me, in any scenario. The rumours about me didn’t help.”

“Rumours?”

“Yeah. Someone spray painted ‘fag’ across my locker freshman year. I never actually found out who did it, although I do have some guesses. The school was quick to remove it, but the damage had already been done at that point. People talked. So there’s always been a lingering suspicion amongst the Derry High population. I think one of the most fucked up things about it is that I would sometimes wonder if James was ever actually attracted to me, or if I just felt like a safe bet because of what people said about me.” Richie’s voice cracked a little, and he pressed his eyes closed.

Eddie wanted to speak. He wanted to tell Richie that from the

moment he first saw him, he was the most attractive guy Eddie had ever seen. That his toothy grin and crinkle of his smile filled Eddie with a warmth like the sun on a hot summer day. That his half-lidded gazes gave Eddie butterflies. That every touch from Richie radiated with heat and melted him like candle wax. But he couldn't find the right words. The appropriate words. So he said nothing.

"And then," Richie breathed in deeply. "Disaster struck. For context, James's father is a very traditional man. Nuclear family and all that. Deeply religious. Fully and completely believes that gay people will burn in the deepest depths of Hell. So, he was supposed to be on a work trip. His mom was usually gone whenever his dad was away for work. James would say he sometimes thinks she's having an affair. Either way, he comes home unannounced, not to find his wife with a man, like he may have been suspicious of, but instead to find his only son with a man. To say he freaked out is an understatement. He beat the daylights out of James. Pushed me to the ground. I tried to stop it, but James just kept yelling at me to leave. To get out. So I did. I hadn't spoken to him at all until tonight."

"So... you *are*...?" Eddie trailed off. He couldn't say it.

"Gay?" Richie asked, putting it so simply. "I think that's the worst thing about it. You're called this horrible word, all your life, and you tell yourself you aren't. Like 'How could I be this terrible thing? What did I do wrong?' I used to lie awake at night, wishing, begging, pleading that I'd wake up straight. I always felt so guilty. That I really was this horrible thing everyone kept calling me." Richie shook his head. "I still like girls, though." He paused. "But that doesn't matter to them. If you like boys, then you're a fag, and that's all there is to it. Cut and dry."

Eddie thought back to Beverly's party, Bryce's comments, Richie's defensiveness.

"Richie... now I have to tell you something."

Richie looked at Eddie, like he was trying to read for something in Eddie's eyes.

"The night of Beverly's party," Eddie started, and Richie's brows

furrowed. "The night I met you. I..." Eddie hesitated. "I saw you and James. I didn't mean to. I went out for some fresh air. I..." Eddie chuckled dryly. "I smelled weed and thought it was a skunk, so I was checking around the yard in case one was... afoot. Then I saw you guys, against the side of the house. I knew I saw something I shouldn't have so I went back inside."

"You saw and you didn't say anything? To anyone? Or to me?"

Eddie shook his head.

"I didn't want to tell you until you were ready to tell me about it on your own. It wasn't my place to decide when that would be. If you hadn't ever told me about it, I was prepared to take it to the grave."

Richie considered Eddie's words for a moment. "Thank you," Richie whispered, his eyes brimming with tears once again. "God, we really were so careless. I used think we had it so well planned, no one could ever find out. Anyone could have seen us that night, thank God it was you. Imagine fucking Bryce catching us. The whole school would have known. James would have hated me."

Richie put his head in his hands. "Not like it matters now, though." He looked up at Eddie. "I just thought... fuck...I don't know what I thought. I was stupid."

"No, you weren't."

"I just thought that he would be able to figure himself out."

"Maybe he just needs more time. We're only in high school. Not everyone can have themselves figured out by high school. We're all still learning."

"What about you, Eddie Kaspbrak?"

"What about me?"

"Do you have yourself figured out?"

"Hell no. There's still a lot I need to figure out."

“Like what?”

Eddie patted Richie’s knee. “Maybe another day, Richie.”

“Deal.” Richie said, standing up and helping Eddie to his feet. “What do you say we go back out there and party like we’re seniors in high school?”

“Deal,” Eddie smiled.

They left the bathroom and drank, and danced, and sang, and laughed, and drank more.

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm so glad you guys are liking this thus far, and thank you for being patient while i struggled to get this chapter together. it's a little bit longer, so hopefully it was worth waiting for. i'm thinking this fic will probably be around 4 chapters total, so stay tuned! thanks again!

Author's Note:

if anyone actually wants me to continue this let me know !! i have some things planned and i know what direction i want to take it, please let me know your feedbacks and constructive criticisms and what not!